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Written on October 2, 2015 at 2:42 pm by [jalexander](#)

Less Than 8 Hours to Better Women's Health

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By Cmdr. Eva Domotorffy, Office of Women's Health, U.S. Navy Bureau of Medicine and Surgery



The pursuit of health and remaining healthy seems almost like a full-time job. And for women, the additional gender-specific recommendations add complexity to an already arduous schedule of regular exercise, eating well, medical and dental check-ups, immunizations, screening exams, etc., etc. As a “40-something” woman with a full-time job, two small children and a myriad of responsibilities, like so many other women in the military community, I often ask myself – where do I really need to devote time and effort to optimize my current and future well-being?

As a [Nurse Corps](#) officer currently serving in the Office of Women's Health at the Navy Bureau of Medicine and Surgery, I have the opportunity to interact with women's health experts in Navy Medicine and civilian organizations. In sifting through files and piles of data, research and information, my job is to streamline correspondence and prioritize activities based upon what is most timely, relevant and important. I have acquired some unique insight and knowledge about women's health – and have learned to look at the “big picture” – and get to the point.

So the question, on behalf of women who want to know, is... what are the most important things that women can and should do for their health?

Of course, chronic disease prevention activities such as healthy eating, exercise and stress management apply to everyone however, since October is “[Women’s Health Month](#),” the focus is on the top three gender-specific steps you should take towards optimal well-being.

1. Get a well woman exam

Nobody looks forward to a PAP test – and the good news is that cervical dysplasia screening (the PAP) has been extended from once a year to every three years; however, the need for an annual health assessment has not changed. This appointment provides a yearly opportunity to interact with your primary care manager or a women’s health provider such as an obstetrician-gynecologist, certified nurse midwife or women’s health nurse practitioner. The visit may include a physical examination, screening tests, counseling and possibly referral for other services. PAP tests and screening for HPV and other STIs are recommended in various year intervals based on your age and risk factors. Bottom line – a well woman exam takes 30 minutes or less, yet can result in early detection of disease or reassure you about your current health status and provide you with information and options regarding health maintenance.

2. Get a breast exam

Mammograms are recommended for women beginning at age 40, although some women without risk factors may follow guidelines to start at age 50. You can discuss your family history and risk factors with your health care provider to determine the initial age at which you should undergo a screening mammogram. Screening mammograms usually involve two x-ray pictures (images) of each breast. Bottom line – a screening mammogram takes only slightly more time than a smart phone selfie – less than 10 minutes, yet can help detect early breast cancer, a disease where early detection is synonymous with more successful treatment. Equally as important, is performing a monthly self-breast exam, regardless of age or risk factor profile. The self-exam, which is best done in the shower, is quick and easy – and does not require a clinic visit (unless you detect something of concern)!

3. Select a family planning (contraception) method

Select a family planning (contraception) method that fits your lifestyle and provides your required level of protection against an unintended pregnancy. Of course, some of you are actively trying to become pregnant and others may be open to starting or expanding a family. However, many women do not desire a pregnancy in the near future – and may be unaware of their options and resources. Unintended pregnancy often results in educational, financial, professional and personal hardships for women, as well as organizational challenges in the form of decreased operational readiness. As a female beneficiary of Navy Medicine – you have the full array of choices since Navy Medicine family planning services are available and accessible, full scope and free of charge. By and large, contraceptive services are broken into three categories: short-acting reversible contraception (SARC) – such as birth control pills, long-acting reversible contraception (LARC) – such as Intrauterine Devices (IUDs), and emergency contraception (EC) – better known as the “morning after pill.” Sterilization procedures such as tubal ligation (for women) and vasectomies (for men) are available as well. Bottom line – a little advanced planning and one or two visits to a health care provider will provide you with the right type of contraception for the current stage of your life.

So there you have it ... the top three things you can do for better women’s health.

If you calculate the amount of time invested in these activities (and this includes commuting and parking)

– it's less than eight hours. The equivalent time of one work day or school day is all that is required to obtain these three essential women's health services. I know how easy it is to procrastinate or delay these appointments – life tends to get in the way of our pursuit of long-term health. However, as you can see, investing a few hours in your health can yield some serious dividends.

Take action now:

Step 1 – pick up the phone or go on-line and schedule a well woman exam with your primary care manager or women's health specialist.

Step 2 – Keep your scheduled appointment – and make sure you discuss your breast cancer risks and pregnancy or contraception plan, if applicable.

Step 3 – Reward yourself with a little dark chocolate (it's good for your health).

Editor's note: please join Cmdr. Domotorffy during a [women's health webinar](#) co-hosted by [TRICARE](#) and [Military OneSource](#), Oct. 7. Register [here](#).



PORTSMOUTH, Va. (Oct. 5, 2011) Lt. Cmdr. Elizabeth Raphael, assigned to Public Health Services, center, is the first female to cross the finish line at the Pink Ribbon 5K Run at the Naval Medical Center Portsmouth fitness center. The annual run commemorates Breast Cancer Awareness Month and drew more than 300 participants from the Hampton Roads area. (U.S. photo by Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class Nikki Smith/Released)

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